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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000935

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TAGS: [AF](#) [LO](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: FICO SAYS NO TO TROOPS TO KANDAHAR, FOR NOW

REF: BRATISLAVA 921 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: DCM Lawrence R. Silverman, for reason 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (U) Prime Minister Robert Fico announced to the media November 29 that, so far, neither the security nor technical conditions have been met to allow Slovak engineering troops to redeploy to southern Afghanistan. Fico added that the Slovak troops were not "mountain rifle fighters who could participate in armed actions." However, if conditions changed, especially security conditions, the government would reevaluate its decision before the end of March 2007. Fico's announcement was largely criticized in the press and by opposition politicians, with headlines implying that Slovakia is embarrassing itself by not living up to its NATO responsibilities.

¶2. (C) Fico made the statement while President Gasparovic DefMin Kasicky and FM Kubis were still flying back from Riga, where they had told the media simply that Slovakia likely would not make a decision until March. MFA sources told DCM prior to Fico's statement that Kubis had had not been able to bring Fico around on the issue during an 11/28 meeting in Bratislava. Nonetheless, Kubis and Gasparovic were not expecting such an announcement by the PM. Moreover, sources within both the MFA and the MOD have told us that the British, Dutch and Canadian governments and militaries had offered a very good set of security services/assurances (in the words of Kubis's chef de cabinet, "the same protection the Brits give to their own units"), and that the GOS was seeking no more security assistance/assurances. Fico still opposed the move. It is not clear from Fico's statement whether he is theoretically requiring more help from other forces, or a change to greater security pervading in southern before he is willing to change his mind. This stance, combined with the PM's comment last week that Slovak troops should not be deployed overseas in areas they would be in harm's way, obviously make us wonder whether the conditionality Fico spoke of today could ever be met.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador spoke to FM Kubis late 11/29 upon his arrival back from Riga. Kubis had been surprised by Fico's announcement, but told the Ambassador that Fico had not made a final decision on the redeployment issue. He and Gasparovic had also gotten Fico to agree to leave open other options, including augmenting the current force in Kabul. Ambassador pointed out the disingenuousness of Fico's "mountain rifles" statement (engineers had been requested) and the availability of security forces for the mission. Kubis responded, with frustration, that we should expect more misleading rhetoric from the PM in the future, even though the door was still very much open. We do not yet know whether the PM's latest statements indicate a change in Slovak intentions to participate in a northern PRT, perhaps with the Czechs.

A Precedent for other Deployments, or a "One-Off?"

¶4. (C) Fico's voice is virtually a minority of one in not wanting to deploy the troops south, but ultimately the only one that counts. We will continue to push the PM his coalition partners, particularly HZDS, to change his view and to provide more support to the Afghanistan effort. FM Kubis recognizes that the PM's remarks potentially set a dangerous precedent, and says he will continue the fight. The Ambassador will engage President Gasparovic for further help.

DefMin Kasicky seems to go along with whatever Fico wants. Of late, Fico has been preoccupied with campaigning for Smer candidates in the Dec. 2 local elections, and perhaps thought his announcement would garner votes (a far-fetched theory, for no Slovak voter is linking local garbage pickup and Afghanistan). On the other hand, by February/March, elections will be long past and the PM may view voter support as a non-issue. While the public is negative on Iraq, it is largely apathetic on foreign affairs and Afghanistan has never been an issue, so Fico may really be basing his decisions on long-standing personal convictions and a vision of Slovakia as a small, inward-looking country that does not need to involve itself outside Europe. The fact that he feels most comfortable with the Slovak National Party as a coalition partner speaks not just to practical matters of governing, but to Fico's own nationalist tendencies. He has stated that Slovak policy has been too oriented toward the West, at the expense of good relations with the East (Russia). Changing this approach will take more than moral and logical arguments: marshalling others to tell Fico that he risks needless harm to his country's international reputation, while trying to trigger a sense of statesmanship in the PM himself.

VALLEE